

Montgomery politicians' gifts, properties to face stricter scrutiny

Montgomery council members received tickets, chocolates in 2010

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Montgomery County Councilman Marc Elrich accepted tickets last year to more than 30 galas and luncheons from charitable and political organizations, as well as concert tickets from Strathmore and champagne and chocolates from the county humane society.

This year, Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park disclosed the information in compliance with the county's ethics law, which requires about 1,900 county employees — including elected officials and department heads — to report on their finances.

Montgomery officials now are examining the county's ethics regulations to ensure they comply with a new state law requiring county and municipal elected officials, as well as members of boards of education, to fill out more detailed financial information. Under the change, the requirements for local elected leaders would be the same as or go beyond those for members of the Maryland General Assembly, which approved the law last year.

State Sen. Jamie B. Raskin (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park, who sponsored the bill, said a series of scandals — most notably in Prince George's County — prompted him to introduce the law.

The county's former County Executive, Jack Johnson, and his wife, former County Councilwoman Leslie Johnson, both admitted their involvement in a pay-to-play scheme with developers.

"The public has a right to expect the highest ethical conduct from its officials," Raskin said. "The truth is political corruption and financial irregularity in one county end up hurting all of us."

Montgomery attorney Edward Lattner said the county is just beginning to examine whether changes need to be made. The county is required to submit a draft of its new ethics policy to the State Ethics Commission by Oct. 1 or face fines.

He said the County Council likely will begin its discussion of a draft policy when it returns from recess in September.

"It's a big undertaking," Lattner said.

County Councilman Craig L. Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, who served in the House of Delegates prior to his election to the council last year, said the disclosure forms, which include details of income, property ownership, gifts, charitable contributions and stock holdings, for both positions are the same.

“It wouldn’t change anything for the Montgomery County filings,” he said.

While the county government’s elected leaders are accustomed to filling out financial disclosures, politicians in some municipalities have criticized the state law.

Gaithersburg Mayor Sidney Katz suggested last week that the city add the topic to its legislative agenda to try to have the law altered during the next session of the General Assembly. City Councilman Henry F. Marraffa also criticized the requirement, saying it is not the public’s business how much he paid for his home.

Kensington leaders delayed a vote on its new ethics law after learning it might not have to comply. More than 80 of Maryland’s 156 municipalities are exempt from the law. All counties must comply.

County Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring said the county’s ethics policy is a model for other jurisdictions.

“Ours is already very, very strong,” she said. “I think maybe that’s why we don’t see these kinds of issues you have in other jurisdictions. We’re very well-monitored. Everything is very clear.”

Montgomery’s financial disclosures for 2010 included the following:

— County Councilman Hans Riemer (D-At large) of Silver Spring is owed more than \$1,000 from his campaign fund.

— Navarro co-owns a commercial property in Washington, D.C., with her husband.

— George Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park and his wife own a rental property in Takoma Park.

— Leventhal earned between \$500 and \$5,000 in royalties from the University of California Press.

— Leventhal aided in fundraising for many organizations, including Bethesda Green, Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless, CASA de Maryland and Community Ministries of Rockville.

— Nancy M. Floreen owns stock totaling \$1,000 or more in about 40 companies, including Exxon, Pepsico, Microsoft, Halliburton and General Electric. She also owns

stock in Oracle, a California-based company that provides the technology for the county's 311 call center.

— County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) is part owner in the Smart Growth Investment, and lists his holdings as less than 1 percent of the company.

— Rice reported wages from county government, the state of Maryland and The Washington Group, based in Bethesda.

— County Council President Valerie D. Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring reported income from county government and the U.S. House of Representatives, where she earned more than \$5,000 working for U.S. Rep. Gwen Moore.

— County Council Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac accepted tickets to about 20 galas, receptions and other events.

— County Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg aided in fundraising for Communities Ministries of Rockville, Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless and the ARC of Montgomery County.

Staff Writers Jen Bondeson and Alex Ruoff contributed to this report.